



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Wright Receives Grant Award from Wenner-Gren Foundation

The Wenner-Gren Workshop Grant will bring Indigenous, Mexican, and US experts together to create an atlas of the Sonoran Desert's rock imagery

Tucson, Ariz. (January 14, 2025)—Tucson-based nonprofit Archaeology Southwest is pleased to announce that Preservation Anthropologist Aaron Wright has received an award of \$19,558 from the Wenner-Gren Foundation to support a three-day workshop for scholars and Indigenous knowledge holders that will result in a public-facing volume on the rock imagery of the Sonoran Desert. The purpose of this grant program is to underwrite “meetings and events that promote the development of inclusive communities of anthropologists and advance significant and innovative research.”

This first-of-its-kind seminar will bring Indigenous, Mexican, and US scholars and knowledge holders together to synthesize information and deep knowledge regarding Indigenous rock imagery across the iconic Sonoran Desert, which thrives on both sides of the Mexico–US border, largely in the respective states of Sonora and Arizona. The Sonoran Desert has been home to Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial. Creators of this library on the landscape through rock imagery are the ancestors of today’s Cochimí, Cucapá, Kiliwa, Kumeyaay, Kwatsáan, O’Odham, Opata, Paipai, Piipaash, and Yoeme communities.

“We aim to transcend linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical barriers that have siloed understanding and made it hard to conceive of the Sonoran Desert as an integrated cultural landscape,” said Wright, who serves as the workshop’s primary organizer. “The ultimate goal is to produce an atlas-like volume that situates the Sonoran Desert’s rock imagery in relation to contemporary Indigenous heritage and identity.” The secondary organizer, Dr. Amador Bech, will arrange for a Spanish translation to be published through the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Wright prefers the term “rock imagery”—which includes petroglyphs (figures abraded into rock surfaces), pictographs (figures created by applying pigment), and geoglyphs or ground figures—to the more commonly used “rock art.”

“In talking and working with Tribal Elders and advisors, I’ve seen how petroglyphs and pictographs move them. And some have told me plainly these images are not art; they

were not made simply to make us feel a particular way,” Wright explained. “I’m fortunate to have been educated that these are messages from the ancestors, who intended to convey vital cultural and spiritual information to their descendants. To see and visit them safely and respectfully requires a certain kind of mindset and approach.”

This workshop will feature 18 participants from Mexico, US, Tohono O’odham Nation, Fort Yuma Quechan Tribe, Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, Gila River Indian Community, and the Pascua Yaqui Tribe. A Spanish-English translator will facilitate. Six Indigenous collaborators will provide insight and feedback on the scholarly presentations and offer their own perspectives and experiences with rock imagery. Researchers will eventually work with Indigenous collaborators to revise and expand contributions to the atlas.

Wright and colleagues at Archaeology Southwest are pleased with early responses to the project. “There’s lots of talk of decolonizing archaeology; these organizers have a clear plan,” wrote an anonymous reviewer in a comment included with the grant award package.

ABOUT ARCHAEOLOGY SOUTHWEST

Founded in 1989, Archaeology Southwest is a private 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Tucson, Arizona, on the homelands of the Tohono O’odham Nation and the Pascua Yaqui Tribe. We are privileged to work across the US Southwest and into northwestern Mexico on the Lands and Territories of many Indigenous Tribes and descendant communities.

We pioneered the practice of Preservation Archaeology, a holistic and conservation-based approach to exploring and protecting heritage places while also honoring the diverse values these places hold for people. We gather information, help make it accessible and understandable, share it with the public and decision-makers, advocate for landscape-scale protection, and co-steward heritage preserves with people who share interests in their conservation. We are committed to real and ongoing collaboration with Tribes in all areas of our work.

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